

A Lonely Word
Baptism of Rocco Zullo
Amos 8:4-7
Lk 16:1-13
Sept 22, 2019
Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Amos 8:4-7

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

Luke 16: 1-13

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

You heard the words that I read, but do you know what I said? While Jesus' parables are meant to be thought provoking and challenging, the one known as "The Parable of the Dishonest Steward" is also known as "The Parable of the Shrewd Manager," and it ranks as Jesus' most challenging of the parables.

A rich man has a manager who has squandered his property. He has been given some authority and responsibility, but he has done poorly at this. The rich man summoned his employee to fire him but first he wanted an accounting of his work, his management, for the debts that were owed to the rich man by many in the community.

The manager knows that he is about to lose this comfy, cushy, job but is able to think quickly and shrewdly on his feet. Anticipating that the rich man padded a variety of fees and taxes to the debts others owed him, he met with the rich man's debtors one on one and reduced a good percentage of their debt. With one quick plan, the shrewd manager had befriended the debtors who will now be indebted to him instead and support him since he is unemployed.

As we hear this story we would expect to hear that the rich man became furious at being cheated out of what he was owed, even if it was only in his own eyes that he was owed grand sums. But here we have Jesus' first parable twist as the rich man commends the dishonest manager for being so clever. Just as the rich man concedes that he has been outsmarted, Jesus gives us a second and far more confusing twist. "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

Wait----can Jesus really be saying for us to make friends for ourselves by means of dishonest wealth? Can Jesus really be saying 'Blessed are the dishonest for they will be blessed with wealth?

Remember parables are meant to be confusing. They are meant to turn conventional wisdom on its head, and to leave us listeners scratching our heads and praying for guidance. They are not meant to be simple because life is not simple, living a life of faith is not simple. God does not let us get away with easy answers because life is not easy. It is in the challenges of life that we continually know our dependence upon God.

Let's step back into the story for a moment before it begins to get confusing.

The rich man called for his manager. "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management."

We have all heard those words spoken to us in one form or another.

Perhaps it was being called down to the principal's office for some misbehavior at school.

Perhaps you have been called into your boss' office to discuss 'a matter of concern.'

Perhaps it is the hesitation to honestly answer our doctor's questions about how much we exercise, sleep, eat and drink.

Perhaps you receive news that you will be audited by the IRS.

Perhaps your spouse speaks those four unnerving words, "We need to talk."

Perhaps it is every Sunday when we come to the Prayer of Confession and open ourselves and our awareness to God's knowledge of the ways we have fallen short.

In all of those situations we have an accounting of our management demanded of us, and this can be intimidating, possibly even fearful. We do a quick mental inventory, 'What have I done? What did I forget to do? 'What is going to happen to me?'

Having to give an accounting is to acknowledge what is private and personal, and sometimes so much so we keep the honest truth from even ourselves, yet the truth is being demanded of us.

The shrewd manager had a clever and dishonest plan of action for which he was held accountable. In a desperate time, a desperate situation, he responded in a creative yet unethical way. He did his job, but not truthfully or sincerely. Getting out of his predicament meant being both honest and dishonest, truthful and lying, capricious and careful. It meant compromising his integrity to get out of this complicated mess. The accounting the shrewd manager was called to give was not just about his books, it really was an accounting of his life.

Haven't we all been in a situation where our response is not from our best selves, where we have for whatever reasons taken an easier yet less than honest way out, or said the words that bailed us out but were not just and sincere? We've had to make decisions or compromises that hurt someone at we gained something at the expense of another. We've practiced deceit, given false balances, and trampled the needy because life is grey, it is not black and white. Ambiguity abounds.

In a desperate time, a desperate situation, we have responded in a creative yet unethical way. We handled the situation, but not truthfully or sincerely. Getting out of our predicament meant being both honest and dishonest, truthful and lying, capricious and careful. It meant compromising our integrity to get out of the complicated mess. The accounting we are called to give is really was an accounting of our life, in the ways we want to be seen, just as much in the times that are grey, tense, murky and messy. We aim for integrity and honesty, yet human nature and mixed motives are a part of our lives. We know that honesty can be a lonely word.

In the closing lines of the parable Jesus offers insight and redemption. No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Where and when is our greatest effort? Which master do we aim and strive to serve? To give an accounting of the management of our lives is to open the books of our life and examine, audit, and acknowledge what we are doing with our life and who we are serving. It will not be neat and tidy but where is our greatest love?

When we welcomed Rocco through the waters of baptism this morning, our promise was to guide him in the accounting book of his life, just as we have each had that promise made for us as we have chosen the master we love and are devoted to. Amen.

